Chapter 4

Dancing boys and the moral dilemmas of military missions; the practice of bacha bazi in Afghanistan

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There he [lieutenant of the Afghan National Army] was, in bed with a “chai boy” in the spoons position. I thought: “Bloody hell, with a child? Is that normal?” But in their eyes it is normal. It is their culture, so you just close the door, because what else can you do? You can’t really pull that guy out of bed, but those are the moments when you really want to do something (Major in the Marine Corps, serving as a member of an Operational Mentoring and Liaison Team)

Introduction

In 2010, the *Frontline* news program of PBS in the United States brought the harrowing situation of the dancing boys in Afghanistan to worldwide attention by broadcasting a documentary entitled “The Dancing Boys of Afghanistan.” In the documentary, Afghan journalist Najibullah Quraishi sketches the lives of these often impoverished young “entertainers,” who live in the service of affluent and influential Afghans. The boys are dressed as women and wear makeup in order to perform dances for their masters. This is, however, not as innocent as it seems, as the boys are then taken to the home of the highest bidder. This practice, in which an adult man (bacha baz) has a sexual relationship with a preadolescent boy (bacha bearesh, boys without beards) is called *bacha bazi* (Persian for “boy play”). The boy is taken into the family or social circle of the man and is sometimes given some form of special payment and/or financial support for his family. The boy is a status symbol and sexual partner to the influential men in question.

The dancing boys of Afghanistan documentary gave rise to significant responses. The documentary was, however, not the first time that Western media channels had highlighted this practice. In 2009, Travis Schouten, a former corporal of the Canadian Armed Forces, reported on the rape of an Afghan boy by members of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) on a Canadian compound just outside Kandahar. The events, reported in the *Ottawa Citizen* of September 21, 2009, had taken place in 2006. While the Canadian Armed Forces tried to keep a lid on the incident and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) ignored the affair, Schouten endeavored to bring the issue to the public’s attention. Moreover, he wanted clear guidelines to be drawn up on what action military personnel should take and whom they should report to in the event of witnessing sexual abuse. He was not the only one to express concern. NATO personnel in Afghanistan have similar stories to tell. They talk of catamites or “chai boys” (tea boys), that is, boys wearing makeup who are the servants of,

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2 *The Kite Runner* (2003), a book by Khaled Hosseini, also delves into the practice of bacha bazi. The main character, Amir, sets out to search for Sohrab, the son of his best friend, who was taken by the Taliban. Amir finds Sohrab in a soldier’s house, where he is forced to dance while wearing women’s clothes. After Amir has rescued Sohrab from the Taliban, he says: “I’m so dirty and full of sin. The bad man and the other two did things to me” (278).
3 Pugliese, “Former Soldier Still Fights to Protect Afghan Boys from Abuse”; Pugliese, “Sex Abuse and Silence Exposed.”
4 “T Shouten.”
among others, police and army commanders and who do more “chores” than just making the tea. These stories inspired us to study the practice of bacha bazi.

There are some studies and more documentaries highlighting the practice of bacha bazi. However, little attention is given to how international military personnel operating in this region approach the issue, which in their eyes is a morally and culturally critical situation. In her work on the International Criminal Court (ICC) and war crimes in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Milli Lake specifically addressed the issue of sexual and gender-based violence, including that against boys. However, her work dealt with sexual and gender-based violence typically committed by combatants and the prosecution of those crimes under international law. Her works does not address the roles of international forces or their responsibility and efforts to prevent the crimes. Our work examines the responsibility and efforts of international forces in Afghanistan to deal with sexual violence against boys.

Since there is a remarkable lack of gender-specific data on sexual violence toward men in the international military operations literature, our aim is to contribute to the discourse on the responsibility to protect (R2P) doctrine, concentrating on gender-based violence toward boys in the armed conflict in Afghanistan. In Afghanistan, large sections of vulnerable civilians are exposed to moral dangers, including sexual violence, which can be explained by the complete collapse of the state and society after decades of war. The focus in this chapter is on how Dutch military personnel act when faced with sexual violence regarding young boys, having the responsibility to protect and at the same time also having to maintain good relations with their local partners. First, we describe a number of theoretical notions. Secondly, we examine the background of bacha bazi in Afghanistan and the Dutch and international guidelines regarding bacha bazi. Finally, we discuss what Dutch military personnel did when faced with bacha bazi and give a number of recommendations for future international missions.

Moral dilemmas: Morally and culturally critical situations

The practice of bacha bazi contradicts the legal standards and moral values of most individual members of the Dutch military on how to behave toward children. Moral and cultural values are considered to be relative, in terms of both time and place. Values define what is important and right and serve as the basis of norms within societies. While moral values can be personal or group-based, cultural values belong to a specific group of people. Cultural values deal not only with morals, but also with “knowledge, art, belief and any other capabilities

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5 Jalalzai, Child Sex, Bacha Bazi and Prostitution in Afghanistan; Leatherman, Sexual Violence and Armed Conflict.
6 Lake, “Ending Impunity for Sexual and Gender-Based Crimes,” 1-32.
7 Carpenter, “Recognizing Gender-Based Violence against Civilian Men and Boys in Conflict Situations,” 97.
8 Frey, Eye Juggling; Verweij, “Morele Professionaliteit In de Militaire Praktijk,” 126-138.
and habits acquired by man as a member of society.” In the eyes of our respondents, sexual contact with children, both girls and boys, is unacceptable. Dutch military personnel experienced bacha bazi as a morally and culturally critical situation. These are defined as situations in which the conduct of the local population in a deployment area (i.e., a different culture) is experienced as conflicting with one’s own personal moral and cultural values. The issue of bacha bazi is one of the morally and culturally critical situations most mentioned by our respondents, members of the Royal Netherlands Army with deployment experience in Afghanistan.

Some members of the Dutch military experience these situations as a moral dilemma, owing to the fact that some of their local counterparts may be involved. We define a moral dilemma as a situation in which there is a conflict between two or more moral values that cannot be respected simultaneously. Dealing with moral questions requires moral competence. Moral competence involves people knowing what is expected of them and being prepared to act accordingly. Six elements are important for moral competence. First is becoming aware of your own values and the values that may be at stake in a given situation. One can gauge the moral dimension of a situation only if one is capable of recognizing the values that are being violated. The next step is to make a judgment about the situation and communicate it. Finally, is the preparedness to act upon the judgment and be accountable for the choice made in the given situation.

Although a number of military personnel feel that values clash in the case of bacha bazi, they are not clear on what action they should take. Some respondents indicated that the chai boys are part of Afghan culture and used this argument as a reason for taking no action. A particular view of Afghan culture and the difference with Western culture is constructed, in which the phenomenon of chai boys are viewed as normal in the context of Afghanistan. This can be framed as orientalism, which according to Edward Said has “less to do with the regions and people they essentialize, exoticize and objectify than with the conditions under which the discourses were produced.” This is also a clear culturally and morally relativist point of view. Moral and cultural relativism is based on the observation that different cultures have different moral standards, which is merely descriptive. Normative moral relativism holds that because nobody is right or wrong, we ought to tolerate the behavior of others even when we disagree with their morality. There are several important drawbacks to moral relativism. For example, you can never criticize cultures (including your own, even if slavery

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9 Frey, Eye Juggling; Verweij, “Morele Professionaliteit in de Militaire Praktijk.”
10 Maas, “Confrontaties Met Moreel Kritische Situaties.”
11 Statman, Moral Dilemmas, 32; Baarda and Verweij, “Military Ethics, 2.
14 Stanski, “So These Folks are Aggressive,” 73-94.
or genocide takes place), making moral change very problematical. As Russell Blackford notes, it is important that we do not tolerate everything, nor should we adopt a quietism about moral traditions that cause hardship and suffering. Equally, we should not passively accept the moral norms of our own societies, when they are ineffective, counterproductive, or simply unnecessary.

Method

Twenty-nine semi-structured interviews were conducted with Dutch military personnel on morally and culturally critical situations they encountered during their deployments. Of the twenty-nine respondents, twenty-two had been deployed to Afghanistan (to Kabul, Kandahar, Uruzgan, Deh Rawod, and Mazar-e Sharif, among other places) for at least one term (three to six months). During the interviews only open questions were asked, such as, “Can you give us examples of cultural differences which conflict with your values?” The Dutch respondents mentioned young boys who were sexually assaulted in Afghanistan. Although we did not ask about sexual violence explicitly, it was mentioned as a morally and culturally critical situation with great regularity. Based on the data we decided to focus on this particular morally and culturally critical situation. As described, we followed the grounded theory approach.

During lessons organized by the military in dealing with dilemmas and moral judgments, Dutch military personnel are asked to identify a moral dilemma that they have encountered in their military practice. Course participants often refer to bacha bazi as a moral dilemma. As in the interviews we conducted, course participants were not asked explicitly about bacha bazi, yet they often mentioned it. On the basis of this information, five additional in-depth interviews were conducted with Dutch military personnel who had been deployed to Afghanistan and who had specifically referred to the practice of bacha bazi during the military lessons. Furthermore, sixteen interviews about morally and culturally critical situations were held with Dutch police trainers in Kunduz. Of the total of fifty interviews, forty-five of the interviewees were men and five were women, varying in rank from private to colonel and being from all four services of the Royal Netherlands Army. The interviews were recorded and the transcriptions sent to the interviewees for a member check. Names and other means of identification were changed in order to guarantee anonymity of those interviewed.

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17 Levi, Moral Relativism; Lukes, Moral Relativism; Rachels and Rachels, The Elements of Moral Philosophy, Europe.
19 Strauss and Corbin, “Grounded Theory Methodology,” 191-210; Strauss and Corbin, Basics of Qualitative Research.
20 Given during the “Train-the-trainer” Course in Military Ethics for Non-Commissioned Officers and during lessons on ethics that are part of Intermediate Defence Studies.
Furthermore, a study was carried out into the literature available on bacha bazi in general and on specific Afghan, Dutch, and international guidelines regarding bacha bazi. It is striking that scholarly literature on the subject is restricted to research from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Currently, the issue is receiving attention mainly from international and nongovernmental organizations. In addition to the available literature, a short field study was conducted in the Kunduz area in October 2012. Observations were made at the Afghan Uniform Police (AUP) training areas and two group discussions were held with patrolmen of the AUP in Kunduz, representing various ranks, age groups, and ethnicities. Nine in-depth interviews were held with various parties. Six interviews were conducted with officers of the ANSF working at the Ministry of Interior Affairs in Afghanistan or for various police services, such as the Afghan National Civil Police in the Kabul region. Permission was not given to record a number of these interviews on account of Afghan Ministry of Defense restrictions and the protection of privacy. Two interpreters from the Kunduz area, working at that time for NATO, were also interviewed. Finally, an Afghan humanitarian aid worker, who had been active in both the United Kingdom and Afghanistan, was also interviewed. We also spoke to a NATO interpreter. Detailed notes were made during all of these interviews. All of these interviews were about respondents’ views on bacha bazi and the reactions of international military personnel confronted with bacha bazi situations.

The field study was hampered by the unstable security situation. As a result, conducting interviews with the local civilian population was too dangerous, and the first author could travel outside the base only with the help of the Dutch military. The quality and kind of data collected is also influenced by the complex relationships resulting from the different aspects of our identity in different contexts. We are aware that our “multiple positionalities” (i.e., gender, nationality, and civilian status) influenced our research process. As female civilian researchers in a masculine military context, we are also aware of our own position, in Afghanistan as well as in the Netherlands defense establishment. For example, Dutch military respondents sometimes assumed that we as civilian women (one of us being a mother) would find it shocking to hear that the practice of bacha bazi gradually becomes more or less normal to them.

It is a fact that that our work was to a certain extent facilitated by the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). The translators we used were working for NATO and physical access and safety was provided by the Dutch military. All of these unavoidable factors may have influenced our data. On the ground, we were automatically associated with, and even perceived to be, Western peacekeepers. Moreover, Afghan respondents were giving their answers on the question of bacha bazi to a female Dutch researcher from their positions as

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21 Apart from four of the five additional in-depth interviews, all interviews with Dutch military personnel and with Afghan respondents were conducted by the first author, Michelle Schut, in the context of her Ph.D. research on morally and culturally critical situations in the interaction with the local population during military deployment.


24 Henry, “Positionality and Power.”
security officials. It is possible that they simply gave politically correct answers. A further complicating factor is that the practice of bacha bazi is an open secret in Afghanistan and it is not talked about in public. This was vividly demonstrated during a group interview with AUP officers in Kunduz. After one young policeman in the group, who had seen the bacha bazi phenomenon during a party in a rural area, responded that “it is OK,” the rest of the group immediately reacted by saying “no, it is not OK” and then quickly started talking about something else, avoiding the subject.

Bacha bazi

In Afghanistan, young boys are sometimes kidnapped, taken as orphans, or sold by their parents to be used for entertainment and sex. Over half of our Afghan respondents indicate that these boys are abused. The boys, who are sometimes no more than eleven years old, are selected for their height and beauty. The young boys are valued for “their beauty and, implicit in this . . . , the promise of erotic fulfilment and pleasure.” The more attractive the boy, the more prestige the adult man (bacha baz) “owner” receives. To the bacha baz, the boy is a status symbol. Boys who are good performers are respected and often have the chance to give dancing lessons, earn a reasonable wage, and, in some cases, become a bacha baz themselves. It is a vicious circle. For most of the other boys, however, future prospects are less rosy. They are left without education or money. Moreover, they are stigmatized, which makes it even harder to earn a living.

The issue of bacha bazi should be understood in its context, most notably the state of the Afghan security sector, civil-military relations in Afghanistan, Afghan history, and the social conditions in Afghanistan. Violence against civilians, including sexual violence, tends to be more common in armed forces or armed groups and in societies with dysfunctional accountability and command structures. It is also important to note that attention for men and boys as victims of sexual and gender-based violence is relatively new. Recent reports indicate that the problem might be dramatically underestimated.

In the existing literature on the subject of bacha bazi, various explanations are mentioned. Afghanistan’s turbulent history is quoted as one of the main reasons for large numbers of boys being vulnerable to sexual abuse. In general terms, the protection of boys by the family is reduced, and large numbers of boys are out in the open looking for work or become

25 At the beginning of the interviews, respondents were reluctant and careful in their answers.
27 Schuyler, Turkistan, 133.
The distinction between the private and public domains in Afghan culture, particularly regarding showing affection, is another explanation given for the existence of bacha bazi. As noted by John Frederick, “While affectionate behaviour between males and females in public is not tolerated, between males it is openly demonstrated.”

Another notable explanation in literature for bacha bazi is that it could be viewed as an Afghan custom owing to the fact that it is said to have been practiced as early as the Middle Ages. There are various expressions of the beauty of boys in old poems, songs, and texts, proving that the practice has existed for centuries. For example, there is a written text dating back to 1041 C.E. describing the adoration of young boys: “You know how deep was the love in your eyes kindled within my soul, or how great was my suffering! Bless my beloved! He wished to visit me but could not come near me because of his tear-drowned eyes . . . wine made him obedient to all my wishes.” Presently, statements concerning the beauty of young boys are also made in public, as can be seen in a documentary called Taliban Country, where Jan Mohammed, at that time governor and chief of police, says the following about the photographs of young boys found at a suspect’s house: “Where did you find these boys? O Allah, what good looks! Aren’t they heavenly creatures? What beautiful boys they are. I wish I was young again. They are more beautiful than ten women . . . We will take him [the suspect] along with us and for a few nights he will keep us entertained.”

Although the literature and examples show that the practice exists, we would be hesitant to refer to it as Afghan culture. First of all, it is likely that the practice is not an accepted social norm, nor is it the main culture in Afghanistan. It can simply be a subculture of wealthy and influential men. Moreover, this can be a practice that they can continue due to the security gap and disintegration of the state and society after decades of war. Above that, this practice also seems to contradict Islamic norms in Afghanistan. For example, the boys may often be considered to have breached their family’s honor, or commit suicide, which suggests that the practice is far from being well accepted in Afghan culture.

Bacha bazi is not called homosexuality in Afghanistan. Homosexuality is sex between men, but young boys are not yet men. These boys have a feminized role in terms of appearance and conduct. The male perpetrator is masculinized as the practice gives him (more) power. As stated by Charli Carpenter, “The violence is gender-based owing to configurations of gender
ideas that justify or naturalize it."39 Since pederasty and pedophilia are not applicable to boy play in Afghanistan, we will continue to use the term “bacha bazi” or “boy play.”40

**Perception of bacha bazi in Afghanistan**

Currently, there is no legislation in force that explicitly refers to bacha bazi, but there are regulations concerning anal sex, pederasty, sexual abuse, and the exploitation of children, including the Rome Statute of the ICC.41 Although Afghan legislation does not specifically mention the term “bacha bazi,” it does state that child abuse and pederasty are punishable offenses. Furthermore, Afghanistan has signed international treaties and has a policy to protect children, including the National Plan of Action against Child Trafficking 2004, the National Strategy for Children at Risk 2008, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Children, and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation’s Convention on Preventing and Combating Trafficking in Women and Children for Prostitution. Though it is clear that bacha bazi is against Afghan law, in practice the law is often not enforced.

According to the Afghan respondents, the big problems are that the numbers of police personnel are too low and the authorities are unable to mete out the applicable punishments. This is characteristic for a fragile state such as postwar Afghanistan, where security sector reform has failed to facilitate good governance and police reform.42 The security gap and weakness of government make the arrest and punishment of the bacha baz by ANSF personnel and the Afghan authorities difficult. Currently, the practice of bacha bazi is said to be on the rise again, owing to the fact that the bacha baz is not prosecuted by the Afghan government, since most government organizations are still mainly located in urban areas and provincial administrative centers.43 A further factor is that the safe shelters for these boys are located only in the major city. Respondents pointed out that shelters do help the boys make a better future. Since the boys typically cannot return to their families because their own honor and their families’ honor has been tarnished, it seems that shelter would be the best solution for dealing with the current problem.

A critical question that came out in our study is whether the practice is accepted by a broad segment of the population or whether it is accepted only by male local leaders. According to Shivananda Khan, in some parts of Afghanistan bacha bazi is normal: “Sexual exploitation and/or abuse of adolescent males by older men . . . can, in some parts of the country, be considered a social norm within certain segments of Afghanistan society, particularly

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39 Carpenter, “Recognizing Gender-Based Violence.”
41 Penal Code 1975, Section 427; Civil Code, Section 249; Labour Code, Constitution of Afghanistan, Section 49.
among certain populations”. However, Catherine Norman’s report on the Afghan police in Helmand shows that families actively complain about the behavior of the Afghan police, who are known to rape boys. Furthermore, some modern Afghan songs explicitly demonstrate that many Afghans find the practice disgusting. A clear example can be found in the lyrics of a song by Suhell and Umaira Sadiqzadah simply entitled “Bacha Bazi”: “Enough with this boy play / Our country’s name has gone bad / You have taken the boys’ respect and honor away / With this nasty act you are not getting anywhere.” Just as the aforementioned lyrics to modern popular songs, the servants of the law also speak out against bacha bazi. Moreover, 80 percent of the Afghan respondents in our study stated that bacha bazi is an immoral practice. They indicate that it contravenes the Islamic religion and that the practice goes against Islamic law and Afghan law. One of the respondents was particularly firm and fierce in his reaction to this practice among people he described as “bad people, who act like beasts.”

Boy play is not restricted to Afghanistan. Some versions of the practice have been noted in other Asian countries such as Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh. The practice was, for centuries, also institutionalized in ancient Greece, particularly in Athens and Thebes. Although our study is not about boy play as it was practiced in Ancient Greece, it is interesting to note that there are quite a number of similarities between boy play in ancient Greece and the practice of bacha bazi in Afghanistan. Boy play remained quite common for thousands of years in ancient Greece, even though the practice was criticized. It seems that it was only after the rise of Christianity and St. Paul’s strong criticism of homosexuality and pederasty that a major social shift against boy play took place. How boy play is really perceived is dependent on the zeitgeist. As Foucault has pointed out both in the *History of Sexuality* (1976) and in *Discipline and Punish* (1975), we should be aware that, roughly since the nineteenth century, we have been not only influenced but also disciplined by the proliferation of the modern categories of anomaly--delinquents, the pervert--which “the technologies of discipline and technology are supposed to eliminate but never do.”

### Bacha bazi and international military personnel guidelines

While there is no official policy regarding bacha bazi for international military personnel, several guidelines have been issued on how to behave during missions in Afghanistan. In this section, we look briefly at the primary tasks of ISAF military personnel in Afghanistan,

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44 Khan, *Everybody Knows, but Nobody Knows.*
45 Norman, *What Do Afghans Want from the Police?*
46 “Bacha Bazi By Suhell & Umaira Sadiqzadeh.”
47 Frederick, *Sexual Abuse and Exploitation of Boys in South Asia;* De Lind van Wijngaarden, “Male Adolescent Concubinage.”
49 Ibid.
50 Rabinow, *The Foucault Reader.*
the legal framework of the mission in Afghanistan, and the current guidelines regarding bacha bazi. These tasks, mission goals, and legal framework are closely related to the considerations and the actual behavior of military personnel in the field including when they are faced with morally and culturally critical situations.

Since the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001 and the appointment of Hamid Karzai as president of Afghanistan, the Netherlands has been part of ISAF. ISAF operates with the consent of the Afghan government of Karzai. The mission was authorized by the UN Security Council based on Chapter VII of the UN Charter. As part of ISAF, the Royal Netherlands Army has carried out a number of different missions in various provinces in Afghanistan. Its primary tasks are to assist the Afghan government in extending its authority throughout the country, carry out security operations in concert with the Afghan National Army in order to promote stability in the country, and support the Afghan National Police by disarming illegal combatants.51

UN resolutions give ISAF a role in protecting human rights and civilians. UN Security Council resolution 2011, for example, states, “Reaffirming that all parties to armed conflict must take all feasible steps to ensure the protection of affected civilians, especially women, children and displaced persons, calling for all parties to comply with their obligations under international humanitarian and human rights law and for all appropriate measures to be taken to ensure the protection of civilians.”52 However, ISAF troops are also guests in a sovereign state that has a police force at its disposal for law enforcement. The Afghan police have authority in the area of criminal investigation, which Dutch military personnel do not have. The reality is that there is a security gap in Afghanistan, which is one of the reasons why Western military personnel were recently training Afghan police officers.53 A case of bacha bazi will, in the first instance, be judged by Afghan law. This was also the message the commander and the legal adviser gave to one of the teams of the Netherlands Police Training Group in Kunduz. He stated that “as Dutch nationals, and more specifically, as military personnel with a police observing, mentoring and liaison task, we do not have the right to take action if activities take place that are against Afghan law. It is our task to observe how the Afghan police deal with the situation and then to discuss their approach with them and provide them with further training.” Although this was a clear description of the task in hand, the commander also had some clear advice for his personnel: “If you catch them red-handed, I will back your intervention.”

In the Netherlands, all persons being deployed to another country are given information about the deployment area during mission-specific training, which is provided by the Cultural and Historical Background and Information Section of the Royal Netherlands Army. In these kinds of trainings, participants are told that bacha bazi occurs in Afghan society

51 Duchène and Pouw, Research Paper Operaties in Afghanistan, 332.
53 A security gap exists if, in a postconflict situation, there are no or insufficient numbers of security troops in place to restore and maintain public order. Dziedzic, “Introduction,” 3-18.
and are also shown footage from, among other things, the dancing boys of Afghanistan documentary. Despite this mission-oriented information and other initiatives taken by individual commanders, the Royal Netherlands Army has not drawn up specific guidelines for Dutch military personnel on what action to take when they encounter bacha bazi. The senior leadership within the defense establishment now also recognizes the moral dilemma posed by bacha bazi, particularly when a member of personnel witnesses sexual abuse. Bacha bazi is now seen as an important issue, which is one of the reasons why attention was given to it during the recent police training mission in Kunduz. The issue was discussed during in the workup period of Dutch military personnel and in the training program for Afghan police personnel. In the police training program, Afghan police personnel were given lessons on investigative procedures and Afghan legislation regarding sexual abuse of women and children.\(^{54}\)

The failure of the Royal Netherlands Army to provide guidelines for military personnel has shifted the responsibility for how to act in bacha bazi situations to the men and women in the field. As we gathered from both the literature and our contacts with various colleagues in the United States and Canada working in the field of ethics at the various defense academies, all coalition partners have failed to provide adequate policies for dealing with bacha bazi. In the United States, the subject seems to be avoided. American soldiers and marines have been instructed not to intervene, in some cases, even when their Afghan allies have abused boys on military bases.\(^{55}\) Canada has a similar policy of “don’t look, don’t tell.”\(^{56}\) In 2011, a study was published on the crisis in trust and cultural incompatibility.\(^{57}\) According to this study, reports have been received from United States and Canadian military personnel regarding Afghan security personnel raping young boys.\(^{58}\) In Canada, there was a great deal of media exposure for the case reported by Schouten in Ottowa Citizen. In 2008, the Canadian minister of defence, Peter Mackay, announced that “troops will not turn a blind eye to the abuse of children. Let us be clear: in no way, shape or form have Canadian soldiers and certainly the Canadian government ever condoned or excused allegations of sexual abuse against children in this country or anywhere else.”\(^{59}\) Given the fact that bacha bazi is illegal in Afghanistan and the international forces are there to support the local forces in the development of law, one could argue that there appears to be no moral dilemma. However, there is a clash of values between supporting the development of law and addressing the violation of the physical integrity of the boys on the one hand and on the other hand, the military mission’s need to maintain good relations with local leaders, who may be involved in bacha bazi.

\(^{54}\) Trainer’s Guide, Chapter 4.3 “Sexual abuse of women and children”. This is a guide constructed by the Netherlands Armed Forces for Dutch police trainers in Afghanistan, in possession of the authors.

\(^{55}\) Goldstein, “U.S. Soldiers Told to Ignore Sexual Abuse of Boys by Afghan Allies.”

\(^{56}\) Westhead, “Don’t Look, Don’t Tell, Troops Told.”

\(^{57}\) Bordin, “A Crisis of Trust and Cultural Incompatibility.”

\(^{58}\) Ibid.

\(^{59}\) Freeze, “Report Cites ‘Crisis in Trust’ between Afghans and NATO.”
Bacha bazi still poses a critical question for the military intervention in Afghanistan. In particular, how should military personnel be prepared for dealing with bacha bazi? Should they be expected to intervene? Up until now, we have been unable to find concrete guidelines on these relevant questions. Guidelines could, for instance, include the recommendation to report cases of sexual and gender-based violence to local or international humanitarian organizations. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has developed several guidelines for its own personnel on how to access survivors, facilitate reporting, provide protection, and deliver essential medical, legal, and social services. By this failure to provide guidelines, moral responsibility seems to be shifted to the individual members of the military who encounter this practice and are consequently faced with a moral dilemma. That demands much of the moral competence of military personnel. However, it is clear that Afghan laws, including those relating to sexual contact with boys, must be enforced and adhered to by all persons in Afghanistan.

Understanding bacha bazi: The perspective of Dutch military personnel

The main question in this chapter is how Dutch military personnel act when they encountered bacha bazi during their deployment in Afghanistan. We address this question by examining the views of Dutch military personnel, as a case study, on what international forces experienced and their responses to the bacha bazi problem. In particular, we seek to know whether Dutch military personnel see bacha bazi as a moral dilemma and the actions they typically take when faced with bacha bazi.

Bacha bazi is one of the critical situations frequently mentioned by Dutch respondents in discussions of culture and morality during their service in Afghanistan. Dutch soldiers call the boys involved in bacha bazi chai boys, catamites, or flower boys. The local term, bacha bazi, was not used by any of the Dutch respondents. A colonel who had been deployed to Uruzgan recounted: “We had a clear case of it in the Afghan Security Guard, a boy wearing nail varnish and the rest, with a voice to match.” According to all Dutch respondents, these well-kept boys of approximately nine to ten years of age, not only make tea for senior police officers and dress up and dance for elderly men, but also are sexually abused. One Dutch female major tried to sum up the “positive” side of the bacha bazi phenomenon. She noted that “It is an honor for a boy to be selected, as it increases their status. They are given beautiful clothes and are paid. So there are some advantages for the boys. Unfortunately, they have to do something in return. I imagine that it is not very nice for chai boys working at police stations, because they have to be available to the whole group.” Most respondents from the Royal Netherlands Army see the practice in a more negative light. A lieutenant colonel who

60 UN High Commissioner for Refugees, UNHCR Issues Guidelines; UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Working with Men and Boy Survivors.

61 Although Dutch military forces will start leaving Afghanistan this year, they are likely to continue to encounter (similar) morally and culturally critical situations during future deployments to foreign countries.
had served in Kandahar and Uruzgan said, “After a party, the big shots take the boy away with them and have him sit on their laps, followed by the rest of it.” Often, the sexual abuse of these boys is only a supposition, as the lieutenant colonel further indicates: “I saw boys wearing makeup and dancing during a party, but anything else was no more than suspicion on my part.” However, there are accounts of Dutch soldiers who certainly have observed abuse taking place, such as a major who heard boys screaming during the night.

Dutch soldiers emphasized that the boys are a status symbol to the men they work for. Several Dutch respondents went on to say that the Afghans they had spoken to had told them that the practice is a result of the difference between men and women. As also noted by one of the respondents: “Women are for reproduction, men are for love and pleasure.” The strict separation of men and women was also referred to: “The stricter the division between men and women as prescribed by religion, the more often you will see this kind of thing happening.” A number of the military personnel we interviewed thought that bacha bazi is a legal practice in Afghanistan, but the majority knew that it is illegal. According to them, the problem is that many Afghans are illiterate and are consequently ignorant of the legislation in place. These examples can be interpreted as orientalist archetypes. Afghans are portrayed by our Dutch interviewees as “starkly different from and utterly inferior to Westerners.”

A number of military personnel experience the bacha bazi phenomenon as a shock or as a moral dilemma. This results not only from the practice clashing with their personal values, but also from the fact that they were unprepared by the Dutch military to deal with this phenomenon. From the start, little attention was given to the subject during pre-deployment training for Afghanistan. As a Dutch respondent stated, “During mission-specific training, we didn’t discuss this subject at all. But we did learn that we must respect local culture.” Consequently, for a number of personnel, an encounter with bacha bazi becomes a moral dilemma because they are unsure how best to deal with it. During one lesson on ethics given by one of the commanders at the Police Training Group in Kunduz, a captain raised the issue. He had personally experienced the dilemma while deployed in another part of Afghanistan and had wished to see the Royal Netherlands Army put a number of guidelines in place on how to deal with bacha bazi.

Handling the bacha bazi moral dilemma

Dealing with bacha bazi can prove to be a dilemma in terms of what action to take. Dutch soldiers often had to deliberate the values that are important to them. One commander gave an account of how he had gone with a provincial reconstruction team (PRT) to attend a meeting on power supply. On that occasion, a roughly ten-year-boy, who was under the influence of drugs, started to dance for them. As the Dutch commander stated:

62 Stanski, “So These Folks Are Aggressive.”
He had a lot of scarfs with him and during his dance he started to throw them towards us. The interpreter explained that the one who gets the most scarfs is allowed to go with the boy. . . . Suddenly, I noticed that all of the scarfs had been thrown towards me. I found this an embarrassing situation and said, via the interpreter, that I respected their culture, but this is not the way we treat children. Fortunately, this worked out OK. Later, I was told that I had done nothing wrong and that we could carry on with our business there. Personally, I felt quite powerless as any action you take might have serious consequences.

In terms of moral competence, this soldier is aware of the clash of values such as the humane treatment of children and good relations with local commanders. Therefore, he experienced this situation as difficult and even as a moral dilemma. He communicates his judgment, that he rejects this way of treating children, but at the same time is uncertain about the consequences on the relations with the local commanders.

Cultural difference has been a frequently mentioned reason by Dutch military personnel for not intervening in bacha bazi situations. As one respondent stated, “It is a custom there, a fact of life. It is their culture. I won’t be able to change it on my own.” Another lieutenant from the Marine Corps noted, “You have to put your Western views aside.” During the course of time, soldiers started to see the custom, initially perceived as “strange,” as a normal event. As a respondent stated, “The peculiar thing is that it becomes more and more normal, which is a phenomenon known as mission creep. . . . After six months, you start to adjust and start to assimilate local customs” and “we practically never talked about it, you get used to it.”

In addition to the value of respecting local culture, other values are given as a reason for not intervening. Such reasons include consideration of the safety of Dutch troops, maintaining good relations with important and powerful men in the mission area, and the need to focus on the overall mission. As indicated by a respondent: “You have to break through a certain barrier. You have to think: ‘OK, this is too disgusting for words, but he is the police commander with jurisdiction in this area and I need information . . . so don’t think about the little boy, don’t do it!’” Dutch soldiers developed strategies for when to respond or not respond. As one respondent summed it:

When they [the Afghans] all seem to get together, such as on Thursday evenings . . . don’t get involved in that, particularly if there’s only three or four of you. If there are about a hundred of you, you would probably say something about it. . . . It might be a different story if we saw it happening in our camp, because then they would be on our territory, but now, we are on their ground. You have to work with them, carry out tasks with them and there was also some kind of threat in the air, so you don’t want to disrupt relations with them.

Soldiers learn to define the limits of their action. In the case of the above respondent, it is the location where the practice takes place and the mandate given to him. Others also have a clear idea of when they would intervene, namely if, as stated by a respondent, “he starts to play dirty games in my presence, I will certainly speak out” and “if you see someone
being abused or see someone bleeding owing to others getting too romantic with them, then you have a right to say ‘Look at this blood! Why don’t you stop this? The boy is going to the medical post and he won’t be coming back. Go and make your own tea.’” Other members of the military were unaware of their own moral limits, until they were asked about them in the interviews. In some cases, Dutch or coalition soldiers did intervene. As a captain from the Marine Corps who was acting as force protection for the Americans stated:

*We received a message saying that there was a chai boy at a police post. We went over there and I really thought that the American officer was going to execute someone. . . . We had caught him red-handed, he really had a boy there. I thought it was all over for the police commander. . . . I was pleased to see the boy being taken away and returned to his family.*

In some cases, stories like these had unhappy endings, as some boys were murdered on account of having tarnished their families’ honor, while other boys committed suicide.

Another interesting matter is how the Afghan security troops think that foreign forces who witness bacha bazi should respond. According to the Afghan respondents, the law and the religion of Islam forbid this practice and action should be taken, but both the aid worker and the Afghan security officers remarked that it is not the responsibility of military personnel to intervene in the local system of social values. The Afghan respondents stated that even if military personnel witness a case of bacha bazi, they are not permitted to intervene directly, but must call the 119 emergency phone line or inform the local police and subsequently support the action that the local police take. A lieutenant colonel of the Afghan National Civil Order Police quoted an example of complaints received at the Afghan Ministry of the Interior about a certain colonel, who was dismissed from his post—even though the case was not proven. Although the criminal investigation and judicial chains are still being built up in Afghanistan, international military personnel may not take over criminal investigation and judicial tasks. At most, they may only support the local police when encountering a case of bacha bazi, as they do not have enough capacity. The Afghan respondents have a clear vision of how international forces should respond when confronted with bacha bazi, which is reflected neither in guidelines of the Royal Netherlands Army nor in NATO policy.

As already mentioned, NATO and the Royal Netherlands Army have not put any guidelines in place regarding what actions should be taken in bacha bazi situations. According to one interviewee, who had been the commander of Multinational Base Tarin Kowt (MNBTK), there was only one way to proceed:

*Act on the basis of common sense. Because there was no specific instruction in place on how to deal with it [the bacha bazi phenomenon], I began to discuss the subject with my colleagues during the workup period. . . . One thing we wanted to avoid at all costs was a press report on the subject. We amended the Standard Operating Procedures and Standard Operating Instructions for MNBTK (regarding access to the base etc.)*
During the decompression phase at the end of the mission, the Royal Netherlands Army does little about its personnel’s experiences with bacha bazi. According to a number of military personnel, the workup and decompression periods are not geared toward other cultures. As noted by a respondent:

“All of your standards and values are called into question there. . . . You have to be prepared for that kind of thing. . . . It is extremely tough, dealing with your own standards and values in a totally different culture such as Afghanistan. You have to be continually aware of local culture. I thought it poor that this type of thing is not discussed after the mission: there is no debriefing.”

Conclusions

The practice of bacha bazi is common in Afghanistan. Although this practice is forbidden by Afghan law, owing to the weakness of the security sector and government enforcement, perpetrators are not punished. Guidelines from NATO or the Royal Netherlands Army on how to act when confronted with bacha bazi during military deployments do not exist. During the pre-deployment training, there is only a short explanation of bacha bazi. This could be one of the reasons why Dutch military personnel, and more broadly international military personnel, feel uncertain, some even shocked, when faced with this situation during deployment.

The Dutch soldiers who took part in this study specifically named bacha bazi as a morally and culturally critical situation when asked about behavior of local people in Afghanistan that conflicted with their personal moral values. A number of military personnel experienced it as a moral dilemma, but are unable to explain which particular values clash with their values. Values such as safety and respect for culture, which lean toward non-intervention, are often mentioned. Values that lean toward intervention, such as human dignity and the physical integrity of young boys, are only named by one or two of the interviewees. As a result they are not able to make a morally responsible and conscious consideration for which they could take full responsibility and be accountable for to both themselves and to others. They therefore lack a number of crucial skills regarding the moral competence required to deal appropriately with moral dilemmas.

Both the Royal Netherlands Army and individual members of the Dutch military refer to bacha bazi as a deep-rooted practice in Afghan culture that is seen as normal. This assumption is not entirely correct as, despite its long history and widespread exposure, the practice is prohibited from both the religious and legal points of view. Furthermore, some Afghans themselves publicly speak out against bacha bazi and are also making efforts to combat the
practice. The reason mostly cited by many members of the military for not intervening in bacha bazi situations is cultural and moral relativism (i.e., “it is the culture”). Dutch military personnel also assert that they would not be able to change anything just by themselves, and therefore chose to do nothing to address bacha bazi. However, cultures are not static and can change, as evident from the boy play practice in ancient Greece.

The nonrecognition of bacha bazi as a moral issue or the normalization of bacha bazi through the blurring of moral standards or keeping a moral distance could be seen as a way of coping with the bacha bazi. However, for people with that attitude, the danger of moral blindness lurks. This means that the moral dimensions (and the related values) of situations are not recognized, which makes it difficult for them to make a conscious choice. In other words, the soldier is not capable of acting with moral competence. This might also be said of NATO and the Royal Netherlands Army, which have not issued guidelines to their military personnel. Both of these state entities, seeking to build a safe and democratic Afghanistan, have shifted an important human rights responsibility of state actors to their individual soldiers. NATO and the Royal Netherlands Army failed to adequately recognize or respond to bacha bazi. Both institutions do, however, have a duty to train their military personnel and deliver on the core principles of human rights embedded in their international mandate to intervene in Afghanistan.

As many respondents suggested during our study, we draw attention to the need for more concrete policies to be developed to address these kinds of situations during deployment. This should include training on understanding sexual and gender-based violence, without “ignoring the fact that, in conflict situations, adult men and adolescent boys also face major risks of abuse and violence based upon culturally constructed notions of gender roles.” This may also consist of additional training on military ethics as well as guidelines and support before, during, and after missions with regard to various morally and culturally critical situations and moral dilemmas that arise owing to differences between local practices on the one hand and on the other hand the moral values of intervening forces and the human rights principles underpinning their mandate to intervene in other countries.

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64 Carpenter, “Recognizing Gender-Based Violence,” 95.
References


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